

A PLACE IN THE WORLD

I was getting some sun during my lunch hour the day I met Fisher.

We were in the middle of Central Park, on that big green lawn called the Sheep Meadow. It was a warm afternoon in late April, and the sky had the pale blue look of faded denim. The park was crowded. The previous winter had been stubborn and miserable, like a houseguest who won't leave, so now everyone had been cheered by the nice spring weather. Wherever I glanced, New Yorkers were wearing expressions of gratitude and contentment. They didn't look like themselves at all. I was lying on the grass with my shirt off and my khakis rolled up above my calves.

"Won't you get itchy like that?" said a voice to my right. I propped myself up on my elbow and shielded my eyes from the sun. The man who was talking to me was seated on a blanket a few feet away, with a book in his hands. He had the round, plain face of a middle-aged infant and a look of weary politeness. All told, he was quite ordinary, like an extra in a crowd scene.

"You think I'll get itchy?" I said, in the bored, mirroring tone I often used at bars when talking to men like this.

"I mean to say, I have a towel that you can use."

And with that he produced and handed me one, which I took without even thanking him. I stood up, put the towel down on the ground, and sprawled out on it. Then I waited for him to ask me some more questions, which I planned to disregard. It was a way to spend my lunch hour. But he didn't say another word. This annoyed me. I turned on my side to show him my ass and then stretched a bit and flexed my biceps. I was twenty-four at the time, at the peak of my stretching and flexing powers. I wasn't used to being ignored. When eventually I caught him looking over, he gave me a prim, embarrassed smile. You didn't see much prim in this city, not in my experience, anyway. I was intrigued. I thought about my friend Buzz.

He would have called this "an opportunity."

I knew Buzz from one of my first temp jobs after I arrived in New York. We were in a word-processing pool at a law firm where all the senior partners had the dead-eyed stares of serial killers and the associates scampered around nervously like so many potential victims. Buzz was also my tour guide through the gay bars and clubs of the city. He was fun and campy and fond of using phrases like "A boy's got to take care of himself" and "Long live the checkbook romance!" He was the living example of such sayings, and now he no longer needed to temp, because he'd met a married doctor from Scarsdale who paid the rent on his little apartment near Sutton Place and gave him an allowance to buy ties and things at Bloomingdale's.

Before Buzz met his doctor, we would go out to certain bars in the city that he would laughingly refer to as elephant graveyards, because

of the older, less desirable clientele. We'd let these old guys buy us some drinks and then we'd sit back, aloof and sneering, like royalty from a small country, while the rest of the evening passed in a blur of unspoken negotiation and a protracted tease. Buzz had actually found his doctor in one of these places, and I went home with a few guys I met in this fashion too, men who regarded me with the determination of hungry lizards, until they'd get me to their apartments, where they'd finally pounce, smothering me with their damp coughs and too much aftershave. As their hands traveled over me, I'd often will my mind to wander, like a runaway pet, and sometimes I'd disconnect entirely from myself and have something that resembled an out-of-body experience.

When I described all this to Buzz, he referred to the phenomenon as my "fugue fucks."

But other than being treated to a few expensive dinners or getting a knockoff Baume et Mercier watch or going away for a Hamptons weekend with a burly banker who wanted me to put him in a headlock while he recited German poetry, nothing much ever came of these liaisons.

"What are you reading?" I asked the man on the blanket. I was sitting up now. He looked at the cover of his book, as if he needed a reminder, and then told me a title by Edith Wharton. I don't remember which one, but he said he was writing an article about this book, comparing it with something by Henry James and focusing on modernism's relationship to realism, or something like that. I was concentrating on his jaunty little demeanor as he spoke, more than on the actual words he was using. He looked like a happy cherub as he babbled on, but then after a while he wound down, and his face returned to its plain roundness or round plainness.

"I suppose this sounds very dull to you," he said sheepishly. I noticed he was blushing.

"I guess I've heard duller things," I answered, in a tone that suggested that maybe I hadn't. When he laughed at that, it surprised me, not the least of all because I liked the sound of his laugh, a sort of joyful trilling I didn't expect.

"I'm Fisher," he said. "Fisher Dunleavy."

"Vincent Marshall," I said, pointing to my bare chest.



Later, when we went out for the first time, Fisher would tell me he was still in the grieving process. He'd lost his partner, Charles the Great, as I would come to think of him. When Fisher started to surface from that long hibernation (that day in the park), I was the one who happened to be there, with my clean-cut appearance and my wide, flawless grin, though my fresh-faced looks didn't exactly reflect my less-than-wholesome history. I suppose that was when the lies started and the omissions too. When he asked me about my past, I made up a sunny childhood in a pretty little town by a slow-moving river, conjuring the life of a teenage jock, complete with baseball championships, broken fingers during football games, and winning baskets at the buzzer. I was tall, strong, and athletic, so at least I looked the part. Then, for sympathy, I stirred in some bigoted parents (bullying father, devout mother) who tossed their boy from the house when he came out to them at eighteen, scattering his clothes and possessions on the lawn, like the aftermath of a boiler explosion.

I knew Fisher would question me about my higher education. He taught English at City College, so of course it was going to come up. I told him I'd attended a tiny liberal arts school in northern Maine. It was a place I knew about because someone from one of my temp jobs had gone there and made jokes about it, how it was basically a summer camp where you could get a degree. Fisher had never heard of the place. I was self-deprecating about this college and the education I fake-got there. So later on, if I missed one of Fisher's quasi-intellectual references or if my grammar failed me, I could blame it on my haphazard, backwoods schooling. I threw in some standard descriptions of evergreens, lobster dinners, and Maine accents to give the account the proper New England ambience and left it at that. This seemed to satisfy him. It was an education (I explained to Fisher) that had been paid for with high-interest loans and odd jobs. Of course, if it were happening today, I would do better research with the help of the internet. I'd scan Wikipedia pages for more interesting and varied details. I might lie about a better school. Or maybe, if I was meeting Fisher all over again, I wouldn't lie at all.

It was certainly easier to tell Fisher I'd gotten a spotty education on a bucolic Maine campus than to admit that I'd never applied to colleges at all. Getting my high school diploma had felt like the bittersweet end to a hostage crisis. I couldn't tell him what I'd really been up to for the four years after high school in Pennsylvania. There wasn't much of a positive spin I could have put on the depressed town where I grew up, or my half-dozen lost jobs in fast-food joints, or my succession of drug-dealing boyfriends. And it wouldn't have been a happy choice to bring up my own brief dependency on painkillers either, which had been a fucking bitch to kick. I'd been arrested a couple of times too, for

trespassing and disorderly conduct, done some community service, and had my record expunged. At least I was able to recognize the dead-end quality of that life, its grim futility, like fishing line tightening around my neck.

When I got to New York City, I'd noticed there was plenty of futility here too, but it was gussied up like a drag queen, with dirty glamour and street noise. I found temp work, but two years later I was barely getting by. I lived in a small apartment in Alphabet City with two roommates. One guy danced nights in a cage at a leather bar in the Meatpacking District, and the other was a grad student in anthropology at NYU. Our building had the blown-apart look of collateral damage, and the walls of our apartment were grimy and pitted, like the complexion of a grubby teenager. There were cockroaches in our cereal every morning, and we had a neighbor who shot off M-80s in the middle of the night.

I preserved a few of the real details about my life—the temping and the crummy apartment—though I turned my cage-dancing roommate into a Canadian bartender. I told Fisher I was saving up so I could apply to law school, so I could one day work on treaties for some international environmental concern. I'm not sure where I came up with that one, but I revealed some volunteer work I hadn't really done for the Central Park Conservancy, though I had worn an orange vest for several months, picking up soda cans and used condoms from the side of the road in Pennsylvania, as part of my court-ordered community service.

I sanitized my sexual history for Fisher too, inventing a winsome roommate from the college I never went to, who wreaked havoc with my heart, and a lacrosse player I rolled around with a few times. I pro-

fessed an aversion to casual encounters, telling Fisher I was basically this rather bashful sort of person, despite my hunky and robust appearance. I didn't mention my larcenous ex-boyfriends back home or my safari work with Buzz at the bars or the jerk-off video I'd done a few months earlier for some troll I met at an after-hours club because I was short on rent money.

It wasn't really so astonishing when I began to view Fisher as the potential antidote to my snakebit existence. I figured if I could create a sweet, winning image for myself, it would be better for everybody. From the beginning, Fisher wanted to see only the best in me anyway, like some indulgent grandmother in a storybook about naughty children. So I wove this earnest narrative into something modest and believable and, with the help of some bright smiles, a cheerful mood, and my habitual gee-whiz line readings, I became something to Fisher that I had never been with anyone else before: irresistible.

This was many years ago, back in the eighties.



We'd been out on a few dates before I finally agreed to go back to his place, thereby further demonstrating my innocent ways. Fisher lived in a two-bedroom co-op in a doorman building on Riverside Drive. He seemed both proud and nervous while showing me around for the first time. The entrance foyer of the apartment led into an oversized living room with several built-in bookcases, some sleek furniture, and a working fireplace. There was a formal dining room, which was rarely used, Fisher said, as if describing a disappointing relative he didn't like to visit. The wood floors throughout the apartment

were rich and glossy. They shimmered like sheets of ice. The bedrooms were good-sized, the closets as deep as small caves. It was a prewar building, and Fisher pointed out the moldings and other original details with the glee of an archaeologist showing off the results of a successful dig. Coming from the combat zone that was my downtown apartment, I was duly impressed.

The master bathroom was really something special, with its art deco fittings and huge glassed-in shower sporting half a dozen showerheads. It could fit a rugby team, if one were so inclined, though I caught myself before making that particular observation. Best of all, off of this was a utility room with a washer and dryer. Outside of the city, these things—large closets, fireplaces, laundry rooms—were standard-issue, but in Manhattan they were prized above jewels.

It was a corner apartment on a high floor. Sun spilled through the windows at all times of day, and there were river views, Fisher told me, but now it was night, so all I could see of the outside was the black marble sky and the lights of New Jersey winking in the distance. Aside from all the books, the entire space was neat and streamlined, in the manner of an airplane hangar. But on most of the pale walls and on nearly every surface, even in the kitchen and bathrooms, there were framed photos of Charles.

Sometimes Fisher (a younger and better-looking version of him) was standing next to his late spouse in some kind of rollicking pose, but mostly these pictures featured Charles alone, square-jawed and dashing—rappelling down a rock wall, steering a kayak, deep-sea fishing. It was like paging through an L.L.Bean catalog with only one model. When Fisher told me, over dinner on our first date, that Charles had died at the age of forty-six, he had been quick to add, “It wasn’t

AIDS,” as if by assuming this it would somehow sully the memory of their ironclad monogamy.

“I didn’t think that,” I said defensively, though of course I had, given the realities of the world we were living in and my own cynicism about idyllically monogamous relationships.

Fisher had told me he met Charles at Dartmouth, tossing a Frisbee around on the quad, which seemed an appropriately sun-dappled beginning for these two. Not long after this, they’d fallen into each other’s arms and embarked on the kind of iconic, against-all-odds gay romance that now spawns so many indie films.

“It was acute lymphoblastic leukemia,” Fisher explained. “Charles was sick for a long time, and he held on a lot longer than anyone imagined he could. Even the hospice nurses, who’d seen everything, couldn’t believe it. He’s been gone almost three years now.”

Fisher still seemed numb and hollowed out when he told me this. I offered up what I guessed were the right sympathetic sounds, but I didn’t have much experience feeling sorry for anyone, so I wasn’t sure how convincing I was. Now, on my first visit to the apartment, as we reentered the living room after our little tour, I picked up one of the photos from a bookcase: Charles in a Mets cap in front of Shea Stadium, smiling and carefree, like a guy in a beer commercial, the way he looked in all of these shots, more or less.

“Charles, huh?” I said.

“Yep, that’s my husband,” Fisher answered solemnly.

“Handsome,” I said.

“Yes,” Fisher said, as if he were confirming the existence of gravity.

Fisher always referred to Charles as “my husband” or “my spouse,” though this was long before marriage equality . . . or cell phones, for

that matter, or Facebook, or lots of other things we now take for granted.

I stood there with the photo of dead Charles in my hands, trying to behave as a kinder person might. Fisher took the photo from me and then we sat on the sofa together. I hoped he wasn't going to hug the frame to his chest or sit there ticking off a list of his spouse's virtues and assets. From previous conversations, I already knew that Charles had done well in real estate and later run a successful catering business before he took ill. It was his money that had purchased the apartment we were sitting in. And, after seeing all these photos, I also knew the guy was great-looking and adventurous. This seemed like more than enough info for one night.

"You see, the thing of it is," Fisher was saying to me now on the sofa, "I haven't had anyone here since Charles passed. Men, I mean. And, actually, there's never been anyone else for me other than Charles. So, you coming here is kind of this rather miraculous situation. I mean, it's a somewhat unprecedented event, actually. And you could say I am a bit flummoxed, because I happen to like you quite a bit, Vincent, and I am not sure what your opinions are of me or on the subject in general."

When he got nervous, Fisher spoke in a stilted and formal way, maybe because of all that Edith Wharton and Henry James he read. As he explained this about himself, there was that prim, embarrassed smile again too, the one from that day in the park. I found myself reaching out to touch Fisher's cheek. I told myself it was because I wanted him to stop talking, but before I knew it, I was taking the photo out of his hands, putting it carefully aside, and pulling him toward me.



Fisher asked me to move in with him eight days later. I'd been on Riverside Drive less than a month when Buzz insisted on visiting. He made a hooting sound when he walked in the front door and then wandered about the place, singing "Movin' On Up," the theme song from *The Jeffersons* in a mincing falsetto.

I was glad Fisher was at his office hours at the college, which was how I'd planned it.

"It's *purdy* here," Buzz said after he stopped singing, "but a bit stark and anorexic, if you ask me. It's like the Karen Carpenter of apartments. I don't mind the white walls, but really, honey, where's all the stuff?"

I'd been to Buzz's studio apartment, which was cluttered with clothes, magazines, and empty fast-food containers. His place was brimming with chaos and unanswered questions, like a crime scene.

"Yeah, I guess we keep it pretty tidy," I told Buzz.

I didn't mention that there was a storage space in Chelsea with all the clothes and things that belonged to Charles, plus the accumulation of memorabilia from their lives together, everything Fisher couldn't bear to see every day but didn't want to get rid of either.

Buzz and I sat at the kitchen table, where he admired the fancy appliances. It was a nice, gleaming kitchen, the kind you see on television cooking shows. I had put a bowl of grapes out and poured us some water. I wasn't offering anything else. I didn't want Buzz to get too comfortable. Fisher's office hours weren't going to last forever.

He popped a grape in his mouth.

"So, it's really nice here and all," he said, "but wouldn't it be better if you could convince your guy to get you your own place? I mean, if

Dr. Feelgood was around twenty-four seven, I'd put a staple gun to my head in no time. I like my independence."

I didn't mention that sleeping with a sixty-year-old orthopedist to get your rent paid was a funny way to define independence.

"Well," I said, "it's not twenty-four seven, is it? I mean, Fisher teaches his summer classes, and he has office hours and faculty meetings and events at the school, and I'm working too."

"That's another thing," Buzz said. "Why are you still temping? You seem to be doing this all wrong. This was supposed to get you out of all that. Wasn't it?"

I shrugged. I didn't tell Buzz that I was probably never going to be the kind of hustler he wanted me to be. I was even contributing to the rent, though Fisher refused to take anything more than what I had been paying in Alphabet City.

"Look," Buzz went on, "if the good doctor wants me to dress only in blue and draw a face on my dick so he can play with it like a puppet, I'll gladly comply. But the flip side of that is, he pays my bills and I don't have to see him all the time. Lord knows he's clingy enough as it is, calling me up in the middle of the night to see if I'm home. And if I'm not, he gets all jealous and possessive, like some fourteen-year-old girl, though his threats still come out of him like the pudgy old man that he is."

I could hear a trace of Buzz's southern accent as he ranted, which he usually tried to hide. He was obviously from down south somewhere, though he'd never name a state or a town, preferring to keep his past concealed from view, as if it had slipped into some witness protection program. I imagined, though, that as Buzz aged, the accent would return, the way a past color bleeds to the surface of a weather-beaten

house. I could also see this Buzz of the future avoiding harsh lighting, draping himself over daybeds, and trying to seduce paperboys, like Blanche DuBois.

"But perhaps in your case," he went on, "I've misread the whole situation, and what we have here is what is commonly referred to as a relationship."

"Don't be ridiculous," I said, surprised by the righteous indignation in my voice. "I only moved in because it's a hell of a lot better here than Avenue C. I'd be an idiot not to take advantage of that, as you should know better than anyone."

"Okay, okay," Buzz said, laughing and raising his hands up in mock surrender. Then he sipped some water and switched gears. "Well, how about the sex? How do you even fuck with good old Chuck staring down at you from every possible angle?"

Buzz had noticed all those photos of Charles right away as he was traipsing around the apartment, and I'd already given him a quick rundown.

"We manage," I said.

"So it's good, then?"

"What is?"

"The screwing. Don't be dense."

"Christ, Buzz. It is what it is."

"Oh my God. So touchy!"

"I'm not being touchy. But have you ever heard of the word *privacy*?"

"I don't know," Buzz said. "I think I have. Is it the same privacy you employed when discussing your wrestling weekend in the Hamptons? You covered every inch of that story without taking a fucking breath."

He was grinning like an imp.

"Don't be an asshole," I said.

I couldn't exactly say what I felt for Fisher at that particular moment, but I wasn't going to turn him into some horny, absent-minded-professor punch line for Buzz either. That's not how it was at all. Fisher wasn't some creeper. If anything, I think our age difference embarrassed him. I definitely couldn't tell Buzz how Fisher had actually wept the first time we messed around, how sometimes all we did since then was hold each other and kiss—though when we did have sex, it was always fun and suitably hot. What I wasn't prepared for was Fisher's tireless affection. He might rub my back for a full hour, making slow circles, kissing me between the shoulder blades as I stretched like a cat in the sun. I certainly enjoyed this attention more than the sweaty, heaving encounters I'd had with those old guys from the bar. Even my boyfriends in Pennsylvania, who were rarely sober or fully present when we went to bed, hadn't been up to much.

Meanwhile, I was learning other stuff too. On my nightstand was a stack of books, classics mostly, that Fisher had pulled for me from his bookcases. I didn't have a particularly curious mind, but I was slowly working my way through this stack. I sort of liked Fisher's makeshift attempts to improve my education. He'd also given me his own collection of literary criticism, which was called *A Place in the World*, essays written in his deliberate and straightforward voice, a discussion of gay subtext in the classics.

"My book," he had said bashfully as he handed it over, "such as it is."

Fisher showed me around the city too, taking me to museums and art films, a couple of concerts, the ballet once. We'd gone on walking tours of the Village and the Lower East Side, visited the Edgar Allan Poe Cottage in the Bronx. How Buzz would have howled if I had men-

tioned all this improvement and activity! I could just hear him calling me a West Side construction project, telling people I'd been closed for repairs. He would have moved on from *The Jeffersons* theme to singing me the entire score from *My Fair Lady*.

"Well, I certainly wouldn't want to invade your privacy, dearie," Buzz said now as we sat in the kitchen. "But let me ask you something. Do you happen to have anything else to eat in this lovely place other than these motherfucking grapes?"



I hadn't expected things to go well when Fisher introduced me to his friends either. I was certain they would view me with suspicion and hostility from the start, afraid anything I said would expose me as the twentysomething fraud that I was. Instead, the warmth and casual regard they cast upon me shocked me into silence.

Fisher's best friend, Vern, who was about his age and taught in the same department at the college, would watch me with an odd mixture of longing and dismay, but he was always polite. Though once, when Fisher had taken a phone call and we were left sitting alone in the living room, he said, "Fish has been through a lot, you know, but he seems quite happy again. Let's keep it that way, shall we?"

His tone was cordial enough when he said this, but his eyes were hooded and probing, as if he could see right through me, all the way back to Pennsylvania and straight into my heart.

"Yes" was all I could think to say. "Let's."

Fisher often talked me up like a press agent with Vern and his other friends—with Jim, who did something for the UN, and Jim's wife, Clare,